

Interview with Paul Collowald: the establishment of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg (Sanem, 27 and 28 June 2002)

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[Étienne Deschamps] How did the people of Strasbourg react to the arrival of the Council of Europe in their city?

[Paul Collowald] On this point, I must say — why not accept the fact? — it was we journalists who decided, in our various papers, to explain to our citizens what it was all about and to include them. I can remember that the Editor-in-Chief, as was his role, wrote an editorial; I, as a young journalist, visited the site to have a look at how the preparations were going, and there, the University of Strasbourg, in three days and two nights, had been transformed: the lecture hall, the great hall, had become a debating chamber in order to receive ... There were no premises available. Anyway, we went there, with all the scaffolding, and then we were told: ‘There you have it:’ — the police were there — ‘this is the route. Edouard Herriot will arrive here, the little Alsatian girls in local costume will present him with flowers, the townspeople will be put there...’ Do you see? And, for several days — we did not hold our breath, I shouldn’t go that far — we tried to explain what would happen.

Then on the tenth — the opening of the Assembly took place on the tenth — there was a huge crowd massed around the University, the statue of Goethe, a space was cleared all around and then Edouard Herriot arrived there. After this, obviously according to a script that had been prepared — I don’t know — Winston Churchill arrived in his car, with, of course, a cigar in his hand; he climbed the staircase up to the University and, in august fashion, tossed aside his cigar. I recall that an Alsatian urchin, who perhaps has still kept it as a souvenir in a tin, threw himself on Churchill’s cigar, to everyone’s applause and amusement. So that is what the atmosphere was like. This may seem trivial, but there were great hopes of seeing these great historic figures before them, just there, a few metres away. I should say that this first meeting was carried along by the people in a sort of euphoria, because people sometimes talk about the gulf existing between events and how these events are regarded by the general public. In any case, I can say that on that particular day there was quite a holiday atmosphere.